

# Creating a Learning Environment for Differentiation

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Qualitatively differentiating the content, process, and products within the curriculum requires dramatic changes in the learning environment. When I consider the principles of differentiation for gifted and talented students, I view these changes as almost naturally occurring. But perhaps I'm wrong. It may take more than gut instinct to create a learning environment suitable for gifted and talented students. It requires the creation of a responsive or invitational learning environment.

A classroom that invites and responds to individual learning is characterised by a number of factors and "determined by both the teacher and physical classroom environment" (Ministry of Education, 2000, p. 37). Maker and Nielson (1995) outline these factors as follows:

- learner centred rather than teacher centred;
- teacher independent rather than teacher dependent, for most tasks, including classroom management;
- open to new people, materials, and things;
- complex and filled with resources;
- open to acceptance rather than judgment, and so "psychologically safe" for risk-taking, creativity, and individuality;
- open to varied groupings;
- flexible in all aspects of management, especially scheduling; and
- tolerant of high mobility of movement, both in and out of the classroom.

Hunt and Seney (2001) remind us that "by using these guidelines, environments are created which provide the comfort, autonomy, and opportunities gifted learners need for optimum growth and development" (p. 45).

Creating an environment suitable for gifted learners incorporates not only physical space, but also social-emotional space for growth. In New Zealand both the physical and social-emotional spaces need to be appropriate for a range of diverse cultures – taking into account diversity and respecting culturally-specific learning needs. Clark (1997) refers to this combination as the creation of "people space". Physically, she describes a classroom which looks like this:

- areas of the room are carpeted;
- furniture is comfortable;
- floors, walls, windows, closets, and drawers are utilised;
- colour is used to support learning; and
- a variety of resources or materials are available at many levels and in smaller numbers (p. 329).

Hunt and Seney (2001) further elaborate upon the physical pragmatics with the following suggestions:

- Resources are readily available and clearly labelled.
- Study carrels and small group study areas are provided.
- In and Out boxes for assignments, questions, or requests are provided.
- The overall layout is carefully planned for "traffic flow to avoid distraction" (p. 64).

They state that "in short, the room should be designed as a learning laboratory" (p. 64).

Physically, the learning environment might not even be a classroom – it might be a marae, a park, a library, a museum. The key is to match the environment to the children and curriculum. Do you have other physical strategies you've used which have worked well for you? If so, please send us your ideas!

Psychologically, an environment is created which allows and encourages students to be themselves, to take risks, to build trust and develop self-confidence. A classroom of this nature celebrates diversity and individuality. George (1997) describes this sort of classroom as one with "a comfortable atmosphere – humour, praise, positive enthusiastic attitude on part of the teacher – defined by one colleague as 'cheerfulness'" (p. 108).

Consider your classroom in relation to Clark's Responsive Learning Environment Checklist.

### **A Responsive Learning Environment Checklist**

#### **You will know that the physical environment is responsive when:**

1. There is space for students to simultaneously participate in a variety of activities.
2. Students have access to materials with a range of levels and topics.
3. There is space for the students to engage in a variety of instructional groupings, and flexible grouping is used.
4. There are areas supportive of student self-management.
5. Desks are not individually owned.
6. The classroom has a comfortable, inviting ambience supportive of exploration, application, and personal construction of knowledge.

#### **You will know that the social/emotional environment is responsive when:**

1. The emotional climate is warm and accepting.
2. The class operates with clear guidelines decided upon cooperatively.
3. Instruction is based on each individual student's needs and interests as assessed by the teacher from the student's interaction with the materials and the concepts.
4. Student activities, products, and ideas are reflected around the classroom.
5. Student choice is evident in planning, instruction, and products of evaluation.
6. Building and practising affective skills are a consistent and valued part of the curriculum and of each teaching day.
7. Students and teachers show evidence of shared responsibility for learning.
8. Empowering language is evident between teacher and student and among students.
9. Students show evidence of becoming independent learners with skills of inquiry

and self-evaluation (Clark, 1997, p. 328).

Clark has woven these key characteristics of a responsive learning environment into the Integrative Education Model. If you'd like to read more about that model, go to <http://www.context.org/ICLIB/IC18/Clark.htm>

Cathcart (1994, p. 18) makes reference to an "invitational environment". Ask yourself the following questions, adapted from Cathcart's premises of such a learning environment:

- Are my students actively engaged in learning? Are they talking, making, thinking, exploring, experimenting – doing?
- Are my students exposed to a wide variety of learning experiences?
- Are my students taught concepts and skills using multi-disciplinary or integrated approaches?
- Are my students given choices in learning?
- Are my students asked open-ended questions?
- Are my students provided with a variety of resources for learning?
- Are my students' diverse abilities valued?
- Are my students able to take intellectual and creative risks?
- Are my students encouraged to be original and think divergently?
- Are my students given time to complete tasks or projects of interest, even if it clashes with routines, timetables, schedules?
- Are my students' ideas, opinions, and experiences valued?
- Are my students engaged in conversation, discussion, dialogue with me?
- Are my students involved in planning and evaluating their learning?

Perhaps her key point is a combination of two final factors not listed above – "Am I flexible?" And in order to be flexible means you must enjoy, build upon, accept "the unexpected". Because let's face it, in a classroom of 25–30 individuals – and especially kids – who are taught using these principles, we'll indeed be faced with many surprises!

And those surprises are okay. As Tomlinson (1999) reminds us, "principles of teaching guide us, but are not recipes" (p. 31). She suggests creating "healthy" classroom environments. As starting points, which she advocates can be revised, added to, or subtracted from, Tomlinson gives us these ingredients:

- The teacher appreciates each child as an individual.
- The teacher remembers to teach whole children.
- The teacher continues to develop expertise.
- The teacher links students to ideas.
- The teacher strives for joyful learning.
- The teacher helps students make their own sense of ideas.
- The teacher shares the teaching with students.
- The teacher clearly strives for student individuality.
- The teacher uses positive energy and humour.
- Discipline is more covert than overt (pp. 31–34).

As I read this list I thought to myself "Changing the learning environment to support differentiation ultimately relies upon the teacher." And it does. We must remember, though, that classrooms which operationalise the principles of qualitative differentiation for gifted and talented students are constructed from two basic building materials: physical attributes and those we can't quite see – the ingredients of a healthy psychological environment.

### **References, recommended readings, and websites**

Cathcart, R. (1994). *They're not bringing my brain out*. Auckland: REACH Pub.

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